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SIPDIS

EUR/CARC AND DRL FOR WENDY SILVERMAN

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: DEPUTY SECRETARY DISCUSSES DEMOCRATIC

REFORM WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse, for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On October 2 and 3 Deputy Secretary Negroponte and Deputy Assistant Secretary Bryza met with representatives of the international community and with local NGOs working in Azerbaijan. Representatives of the international community agreed that it is unclear whether democratization is moving forward or backward in Azerbaijan, given the "monopolization" of the political space by the ruling party. They disagreed, however, on the effects of oil revenues on the society at large, citing both positive and negative effects. Local NGOs presented concerns about increasing Islamization in Azerbaijan, and about the lack of freedom of expression and assembly. These meetings suggest that strengthening Azerbaijan's democratic institutions will require time and sustained effort by the GOAJ, civil society and international partners alike. Raising our level of successful engagement with Azerbaijan on democratic reform to that of our cooperation on security and energy should continue to be a key focus in U.S.-Azerbaijan relations after the presidential election. END SUMMARY

DEPUTY SECRETARY MEETS WITH INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

12. (C) On October 2 Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte and Deputy Assistant Secretary Matthew Bryza met with representatives of international organizations and international NGOs working in Azerbaijan to discuss the political situation in Azerbaijan ahead of the presidential elections. Participants included Ambassador Jose-Luis Herrero Ansola of the OSCE, Veronika Kotek, Head of the Council of Europe office in Azerbaijan, Dan Blessington of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), Jake Jones of the International Republican Institute (IRI), and Arjen de Wolff of the National Democratic Institute (NDI).

13. (C) After a short explanation of the work done by the organizations represented, Ambassador Herrero began the discussion of the upcoming presidential election by reminding the group that no election in Azerbaijan's history has met international standards, but that the international community hopes for an improvement in the conduct of the election this year. Despite these technical improvements, however, Ambassador Herrero explained that it is clear that the current President will win massively. The key questions, he stated, are whether there will be violence in the post-election period, which seems unlikely at this point, and whether the turnout will be very low.

14. (C) Ambassador Herrero further explained that there has been a slow monopolization of the political space in Azerbaijan by the ruling party. This includes not only within official politics, but also in print and especially television media. He believes it is unclear at this point whether Azerbaijan is moving towards democracy or not. Jones believed that the boycott of the elections by the traditional opposition parties is an indicator of increasing radicalism within the opposition. He does not believe this radicalism will lead to instability in the short term, but worries that it may in the long term. Blessington pointed out, however, that these opposition parties have little public support. In response to DAS Bryza's question about what would happen if there were more freedom in Azerbaijan, Jones replied young people would create new parties, rather than join the older ones.

15. (C) There was also discussion of how the new money flowing into the economy from oil will affect the country. De Wolff and Jones felt that oil revenues had a negative effect, as they are concentrated in the hands of the ruling elite who have no interest in increasing transparency. Blessington agreed that there is increasing disparity in wealth in the country. Ambassador Herrero, however, remarked that the oil revenues are moving to the general society, albeit very slowly, and that there has been a large decrease in poverty.

16. (C) The conversation concluded with the question on what model Azerbaijan is following. Kotek reported that she hears often from GOAJ officials that they chose to move toward Europe willingly, but Europe should not push too hard or they

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will move the other direction. Blessington agreed that in recent years the GOAJ has begun to push back on Western institutions and claim that these institutions have "double standards." De Wolff felt that Azerbaijan does not want to be Europe, but wants balance. Deputy Secretary Negroponte expressed the hope that the U.S. could improve relations with Azerbaijan in a way that moved democracy forward, not backward.

DEPUTY SECRETARY MEETS WITH LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY

17. (C) On October 3 Deputy Secretary Negroponte, DAS Bryza, and the Ambassador met with representatives of Azerbaijan's civil society. Participants included Novella Jafaroglu of the Association for the Protection of Women's Rights, Saida Gojamanly of the Bureau of Human Rights and Law Respect, Sadaat Benanyarly of International Service for Human Rights, Mehman Aliyev of Turan Information Agency, and Fuad Aliyev of the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy.

18. (C) The participants discussed at length the growing influence of Islam in Azerbaijan. Jafaroglu stated her concerns about Iranian influence creating radicalization in Azerbaijan, while at the same time GOAJ arrests of pious Muslims creates more confrontation. Mehman Aliyev stressed the continuance of Azerbaijan's tradition of religious toleration. Fuad Aliyev, however, expressed concern about the split between traditional secular civil society and religious organizations, stating that each group does not accept the validity of the other's views.

19. (C) Benanyarly stated that this increasing radicalism stems from the more basic problem of the lack of freedom in Azerbaijan. She felt that the increasing corruption, lack of an independent judiciary, and absences of freedom of speech or assembly led people to join religious groups. Gojamanly agreed, citing widespread disenchantment with life in Azerbaijan, leading many to leave the country for Europe, Turkey, or Russia. Mehman Aliyev concluded the discussion by explaining the GOAJ's monopoly over media, including all TV stations and the provision of internet connections.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The visit of the Deputy Secretary was a good opportunity to assess the state of democracy in Azerbaijan just two weeks ahead of the presidential election. The continued "monopolization" of the political space by the ruling party is a long-standing problem and will be the primary obstacle to further democratization in the post-election period. It is this obstacle that will be the most difficult for the U.S. to negotiate while balancing the need to advance democracy in the region and the sensitive nature of the bilateral relationship, and an issue that will need to be addressed down the road as Azerbaijan proceeds toward municipal and parliamentary elections in 2009 and ¶2010. END COMMENT.

¶11. (U) D staff has cleared this cable.
DERSE